

Hate Will Fade and Hope Will Shine
Keynote Address for the Atlantic City NAACP MLK Service
“Uniting Against Hate, Antisemitism and Islamophobia”
St James AME Church of Atlantic City
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Thank you, all. Friends, I am honored to be with you on this important occasion. Here I am, a Jewish clergyman, giving remarks in a Christian church, invited to do so by a Muslim community leader. In this, alone, I believe we can find a hint of hope. And this, indeed, this engagement with one another, this knowing of one another is a theme to which I will return.

But in gathering here, we cannot avoid or evade the shadow of history, nor the need for new deeds. St. James AME is, as most of you know, the oldest African American church in Atlantic City. It was founded at approximately the same time as my synagogue, Beth Israel, whose first location was in the city. The esteemed pastor of this congregation, Reverend Dr. James Coaxum III, like me, comes to this historic house of worship from “away,” but has become part of the heart of this community.

But I am reminded, every time I hear the term AME, and for all the joy and praise and service this denomination provides, of why there is an “A” in the name at all. A tale with local roots, a Philadelphia story, no doctrinal differences marked the worshippers in the front row from those sent to sit in a separate section. Methodists all, Sunday morning should have been a time of unity in creed. The divide was but skin-deep, but it cut to the heart, a division

based on race and color alone. It is a glorious story of devotion and triumph which followed – but in a better world this might have been a tale we would not have needed to tell.

Out of real lives does our story unfold, and the task yet before us emerge.

At our synagogue this past Friday night, we honored this weekend with a service in memory of Dr. King. Our liturgy for the evening opened with the following words: “Dr. King taught --- and we believe – that hate will fade and hope will shine as we grow more, and as we know more. Education is the key to a better tomorrow.”

But perhaps I should elaborate. I need to be clear here. Education involves... experience. Experience, exposure, learning your own roots but being open to, getting to really know those who are different. Pride, without prejudice.

We open with a tale of woe, and a response of welcome. It is August 5, 2012. At the gurdwara, the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, members of the community, men, women and children, gather together in the kitchen in preparation for langar, a communal meal offered to all free of charge, regardless of religion, caste, gender, economic status, or ethnicity.

Into this peaceful setting comes Wade Michael Page, an army veteran and white supremacist - a noxious brew, a toxic and combustible combination which should never come together. He is armed with a 9mm Springfield XD semi-automatic pistol, legally purchased despite over a decade of activism as a neo-Nazi. Six members of the Sikh community were killed immediately. A seventh died later. Many more were injured.

The Sikh faith advocates for equality, social justice, service to humanity, and tolerance for other religions. It is a tradition that originates in the Punjab region of India. It is an independent tradition. Many of its first followers were converts *from* Hinduism and Islam. But in the rancid resentment, the ignorant and hate-filled venom and spite that is the white supremacist movement today they are often wrongly and simply seen... as Muslims.

Far from Wisconsin, in the tranquil suburban neighborhood of North Potomac, Maryland, just around the corner from my home at the time, stands the Guru Gabind Sikh Foundation. I had passed by that building every day for the 12 years I had lived in the area until then. But it took this event... It took this tragedy... Days after the violence, and 800 miles away, together with the Washington Board of Rabbis and the Interfaith Conference of Greater Washington, my wife and I entered those doors for the first time.

I remember the lines of neighbors who joined us, taking our shoes off and the entrance, sitting on the floor, being served a vegetarian meal prepared by the community - everyone was so solicitous to make sure it was not too

peppery-hot for all these Westerners, that they apparently prepared the food that day without many of the customary spices.

As those of who heard me speak at the Thanksgiving service know, or even, well, you can kind of tell that I am a bit interested in food and traditions around food. But that day, at that moment, all I could think about was to wonder why it had to take blood spilled for me to walk through an open door.

Hate still lives around us. It stinks, it stains our American past and stalks our communal life.

But there is also hope. At our very best there are ways in which this country models the building of bridges in ways which may be hard to happen elsewhere.

It is the spring of 1996. I have the honor of giving the benediction at a citizenship naturalization ceremony in Erie, Pennsylvania. I look out at the assembled audience and behold a tapestry of humanity. There, before me, were Soviet Jews and African animists and Cambodian Buddhists and Middle Eastern Muslims, new Americans all. Christians were, I believe, a minority in the room that day – which made me even less comfortable with the specific, single-faith oriented, particularistic prayer offered as an invocation by the Lutheran Bishop... but the best and inclusive and most respectful language for worship in what is meant to be an interfaith setting is a topic for another occasion. I offered my words, meant to cast as wide a net as I could, to lift us up and read no one out. The ceremony concluded, we spilled into the hallway.

Then a Middle Eastern looking man grabbed my arm, shook my hand, and in broken English shared a sentiment I will never forget. “You, Jew!” he said. (I must admit, I was a bit concerned as an immediate reaction at this point. Where is he going with this?) Then he continued: “I, Muslim, Egypt now American. There we fight. Here we can be friends.”

I have my own feelings about the first part – “there we fight.” I have hopes and dreams and a fair number of strong opinions about that part of the world as well.

But “here we can be friends?” What great wisdom! What an amazing American opportunity!

To be friends does not mean to be the same. It does not mean to always agree. God knows there is not always agreement within the same family, the same faith, the same circle of friends.

But this I know: when we open doors, hearts open as well. When we share stories and hear history and break bread, when we listen and learn and feel able to reveal ourselves in return, when we come to know each other, walls fall down. Hate fades, and hope shines, and the better angels all around us find their wings.

September 2015. War rages on in Syria. We face the greatest refugee crisis since World War Two... well, until Russia invaded Ukraine, but that was still a few years in the future.

I stood in front of my synagogue on Yom Kippur that year, the Jewish Day of Atonement, and I called the congregation to action. I challenged them, I prodded them, I asked them to do something for those we might see as an enemy – and who certainly were taught to see us that way as well. I urged us to remember who we are, who we were, where we came from. And the Torah – 36 times the Torah calls us to know the heart of the stranger, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

By May of 2016, our congregation was galvanized, and organized, and ready. A few weeks later there came a scarred, scared Syrian family to this country. We prepared their apartment, met them at the airport, brought them to their new home, and worked with them for a year as they adjusted and made a new life for themselves. This family... had never met a even one Jewish person before that moment. And yes, in fact, they *had* been taught, and once thought, that we were not human.

But there we were – working with Lutheran Social Services, we were, indeed, a Jewish congregation, working with a Christian agency to welcome a Muslim family to this country.

In my tradition, in the middle of the ritual regulations of the book of Leviticus, we are commanded: “קְדוּשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:” You shall be holy, for I, your Eternal God, am holy.”

When we gather in prayer, this may be what we think of. Holiness. Piety. A godly life.

But how? By what means? In what way?

This section in Leviticus continues with deeds, commandments making real this impulse towards holiness. A book I am reading now points out that of the 19 actions spelling out what it means to be holy, 18 are indisputably ethical. This includes, in this section: “וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כַּמֶּוֹךְ אָנִי יְהוָה; You shall love your fellow human being as yourself; I am the Eternal God!”

And, in Deuteronomy, we read: “וַעֲשִׂיתָ הַיָּשָׁר וְהַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה לְמַעַן יֵיטֵב לְךָ וּבָאתָ וְרָשַׁתָּ אֹתָּהּ:” Do what is right and good in the sight of [יהוה](#), that it may go well with you and that you may be able to possess the good land that your God [יהוה](#) promised on oath to your ancestors.”

Piety, then, is primarily praxis. What we believe is made real by what we do. We find our faith not only, but mostly, not in what we pray to God, but in how we treat each other! For my tradition, at least, it is not that ritual is wrong, or that our particular practices are irrelevant. It is, rather, that they only work, that they only matter, with an alignment of the heart.

The alignment of the heart involves... an openness to others. Thus, a turn to God without a return to justice... is an abomination.

Tomorrow, a bit west of here and one state away, a new governor will be sworn into office using three Bibles. When I first heard this, I thought: wow, what an act of audacious Scriptural inclusiveness – what, was he going to use a Hebrew Bible, a New Testament, and a Koran? That would have been... interesting.

But, no, what Governor-elect Josh Shapiro is going to do is use three Hebrew Bibles. The first two have their own stories. But the third... The third is a TaNakH, a Hebrew Bible which comes from... Squirrel Hill. From Tree of Life. From the scene of one of the deadliest antisemitic attack in our nation's history.

For a synagogue in Pittsburgh, an AME church in Charleston, mosques in New Zealand...where blood was spilled in a sacred space, holy words will now be lifted up... in hope for a better tomorrow.

Dr. King, *zichrono liv'racha*, may his memory be a blessing... Dr. King had a gift raw and rare. He had an almost prophetic power, to lift us up, to paint a picture, change a heart, and to with words craft and shape and give birth to a better world. For us, for our time, the work before us involves action. Not just creed, but deed.

Let us all do what we can... to connect, person to person, human to human, in our halls, our homes, and our hearts. For it is only there, and only then, with education, experience, exposure... and real relationships, that walls will fall, and bridges be built. It is only then, and only there, that hate will fade, and hope will shine. And the glory of God, and the greatness of humankind will burst forth. And all will see, and all will know, that this is the story that was meant to be.

May God bless us all... with the great gift... of one another.